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ABSTRACT

Inquiry-based staff development is a promising direction for rethinking practice and research and for generating knowledge from a field-based perspective for adult literacy. Rethinking staff development entails investigating a number of current assumptions: the nature and function of literacy learning in adulthood; adult literacy practitioners as teachers and learners; the concept of a knowledge base for adult literacy and practitioners' role in the generation and use of new knowledge; and relationships between professionalization of the literacy work force and curriculum for literacy education. The Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Project uses a model for inquiry-centered staff development in which participants work collaboratively to conduct systematic inquiries at their program settings, critically analyze current theory and research from field-based perspectives, and make problematic the social, political, and cultural arrangements that structure literacy learning and teaching in particular contexts. Initial interviews with 21 participants in a research seminar reveal that practitioners bring extensive prior knowledge to their work, have had no opportunities to improve practice through collaborative learning, and seek opportunities to examine critically their own practices. Their opportunities to learn on the job are constrained by demoralizing problems with physical conditions, time pressures, and isolation. Findings indicate a need for staff development that regards people's diverse routes into the field as assets, begins with practitioners' questions, recognizes the need for building of community, and creates contexts for knowledge generation. (Contains 73 references.) (YLB)

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INVITATIONS TO INQUIRY:

RETHINKING STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Examining the assumptions that currently inform staff development for teachers, tutors, and administrators and constructing new conceptual frameworks for research and practice have become critical tasks for the field of adult literacy. Drawing on the recent literature and on data from the initial phase of the Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Project, this report argues for the concept of inquiry-based staff development as a promising direction for rethinking practice and research and for generating knowledge from a field-based perspective.

Rethinking staff development entails investigating current assumptions about the nature and function of literacy learning in adulthood, about adult literacy practitioners as teachers and learners, about the concept of a knowledge base for adult literacy and practitioners' role in the generation and use of new knowledge, and about the relationships between professionalization of the literacy workforce and curriculum for literacy education.

Using data from in-depth interviews with teachers and administrators participating in the Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Project's year-long Seminar, the paper elaborates on and raises questions about these issues and introduces a model for inquiry-centered staff development in which participants work collaboratively to conduct systematic inquiries at their program settings, critically analyze current theory and research from field-based perspectives, and make problematic the social, political and cultural arrangements that structure literacy learning and teaching in particular contexts.

The initial interviews reveal that practitioners bring extensive prior knowledge to their work, even though many enter the field by chance and with little or no formal training. Similarly, Seminar participants bring a wide range of experiences with staff development. They have had virtually no opportunities, however, to improve their practice through participating in on-going collaborative learning within or across programs. Teachers and administrators also confront significant barriers to learning on the job, including physical conditions, isolation and structural or program barriers. Provided with an opportunity to name foci for their own learning, participants responded with a range of complex questions that reflect both the local culture of their program and their commitment to larger issues in the field. Practitioners seek opportunities to examine critically their own practices in communities of colleagues within and across programs.

A wide range of approaches to inquiry-centered staff development is possible; all such approaches, however, would build on what people in the local setting want to know and take into account the material conditions of their practice. Findings indicate a need for staff development that regards people's diverse routes into the field as assets that could enrich curriculum and practice; that begins with and validates practitioners' interests and questions; that recognizes the need for on-going networking, collaboration, and building of community among practitioners; and that creates contexts for practitioners to participate in and contribute to the forums for knowledge generation and dissemination in the field.

Introduction

Recent descriptions of the adult literacy workforce paint an image of the field as peopled primarily by part-time employees—either elementary and secondary certified teachers—or volunteers with full-time jobs in other fields and little background in education (Tibbetts, Kutner, Hemphill & Jones, 1991). In both cases, practitioners in the field of adult education—although often acknowledged to be highly dedicated—are presumed to have little formal preparation in literacy education for adult learners. Some scholars make a causal link between this lack of prior knowledge or training and problems of low retention of students in basic education programs, and suggest that in order to improve program outcomes, the teachers, volunteers and administrators alike will need to be more qualified for their jobs (e.g., Foster, 1988). From these perspectives, a central task in the field is to examine how literacy staffs are currently prepared for their work (see Tibbetts et al., 1991, for a national report on ABE/ESL training delivery and content), "to define what actions should be taken to upgrade their skills" and thus to move forward to "create a new profession" (Foster, 1988, p. 1).

There is evidence, however, that relationships between staff preparation and program effectiveness are more complex than some of the current rhetoric would suggest. High student dropout rates, a common measure of program ineffectiveness, may be associated not just with staff competence but with a wide range of programmatic, social and economic factors (Foster, 1991). It is difficult, for example, to assess the role that teachers, tutors and administrators play, or do not play, in retaining learners in programs without more widespread use of systematic and sophisticated approaches to program evaluation, especially studies of styles and practices of teaching, learning, and administering programs from the perspectives of participants (Fingeret & Danin, 1991).

Many practitioners and others believe that impoverished learner attainments on standardized measures reflect not only problems with teaching and curriculum but limitations in the current assessment instruments and strategies themselves (Farr & Carey, 1986; Hill & Parry, 1988; Lytle & Wolfe, 1989; Sticht, 1990; Venezky, 1992). As a consequence, we do not know enough about the prior knowledge,

skills, experience and interests adults bring to programs and about what participation in classes and tutoring sessions enables them to learn. Furthermore, the scant base of empirical research on staff development in adult literacy education makes it difficult to establish relationships among staff entry qualifications, on the job development opportunities for staff, and program processes and impacts.

This paper is the first in a series of reports which explore inquiry-based staff development as a promising direction for rethinking both practice and research on practice in adult literacy education. Here we define inquiry-based staff development as the range of approaches to adult learning that purposefully build on the richness and diversity of real-world experience and knowledge teachers, tutors and administrators currently bring to the field. In these approaches, practitioners pose the problems to be considered and conduct some type of field-based inquiry into daily practice. In contrast to the assumption that literacy practitioners, like their adult students, have deficiencies needing remediation, this stance on staff/professional development explicitly positions practitioners as learners, researchers and reformers.

The report draws on the current literature and on data from the initial phase of research in the Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Project (ALPIP). It is organized in three parts. *First*, we discuss four critical issues related to rethinking staff development in adult literacy: how literacy is learned in adulthood; how the notion of staff or professional development has been constructed over time; how new knowledge is learned and generated in the adult literacy field; and how issues in professionalization of the workforce, such as entry qualifications, relate to curriculum for diverse adult literacy programs. *Second*, drawing on findings from the ALPIP study currently underway, we present data related to the prior knowledge, experience, and interests of practitioners and the culture of the adult literacy workplace as a context for further learning and development. *Finally*, we explore briefly some implications of these data for research, policy and practice in the field.

Issues in Staff/Professional Development in Adult Literacy

Concepts of Literacy Learning in Adulthood

Social and historical studies of literacy practices in diverse cultures and communities (e.g., Phillips, 1972; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Heath, 1983; Reder 1987; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) describe adult learners' complex interactions with written language. From these perspectives, individuals can be expected to vary greatly in their purposes for reading and writing and in the texts they choose to read and write, as well as in the contexts for performance of reading and writing tasks. These studies also provide evidence that different ways of using language depend on community and family structures as well as on differing concepts of childhood and socialization within specific religious and cultural milieus. They stand in sharp contrast to deficit models that emphasize the limited background some children and adults supposedly bring to learning, and raise questions about whether literacy development is appropriately assessed only within a normative framework.

Instead, the anthropological, historical and sociological literatures suggest that because individuals function within complex, interrelated social and cultural systems, understanding and assessing the literacy development of adult learners requires exploring the particular practices that adults themselves see as meaningful under various circumstances, and that reflect their own purposes and aspirations. Viewed this way, literacy can become a tool for critical reflection and action by providing a way for adults to interpret the world and come to understand values, behaviors and beliefs as socially and culturally constructed. As a process of thinking and making sense of the world, literacy viewed as social and cultural practice and as critical reflection entails a self-conscious analysis of one's own as well as others' discourses (Freire, 1983; Gee, 1990; Giroux, 1983).

Portraying adult literacy learners as active participants in diverse social and cultural contexts involving a range of literacy practices provides an alternative to the current public image of adult learners as incompetent individuals needing remediation in a set of predetermined technical skills. This change in perspective in turn

suggests a need for assessing literacy growth differently (Lytle, Marmor & Penner, 1986; Lytle, Belzer, Schultz & Vannozzi, 1989; Lytle & Schultz, 1989, 1991; Lytle, 1991). At issue here is what adult learners, funders, policymakers and the designers of literacy programs count as learning, both in and out of formal instructional contexts, and the roles learners are invited—or expected—to play in shaping the curriculum. Brookfield, (1986), for example, argues that the purpose of adult education is not simply to meet the felt needs of learners, and that the teacher is not simply a trainer or technician, transmitting previously defined skills and knowledge. Rather, adult education is a transaction requiring critical reflectivity and the interrogation of values frameworks, belief systems and habitual modes of conduct. The educator's role is to enhance learners' awareness of underlying assumptions and of the cultural construction of their lives. Learners become more proactive by assuming more control over goal setting and by identifying meaningful criteria for evaluating their learning.

Brookfield's view of adult learning, while not directed specifically at literacy, is congruent with a movement currently referred to as "participatory literacy education" (Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989). Participatory literacy education is centered in learners' "characteristics, aspirations, backgrounds and needs" and in the collaborative relationships among learners and program staff (p. 5). While in traditional programs learners are conceived as recipients of services, in participatory education they "define, create and maintain" the program.

Adult Literacy Practitioners as Learners

The second critical issue concerns the ways practitioners in a field are positioned as learners once on the job. A review of the current literature on staff development reveals several conflicting conceptions of how teaching and learning are constructed in schools and programs. Programs that regard teachers as passive recipients, needing to be trained and improved throughout their professional lifespan, differ in underlying assumptions from programs that regard teachers as reflective and proactive, stressing their roles in collaborative learning networks and their functions within different levels of the system and across larger cultural, social and political milieus.

In the NSSE Yearbook on Staff Development published in 1983, for example, Griffin provided a frequently cited definition of staff development as "any systematic attempt to alter the professional practices, beliefs and understandings of school persons toward an articulated end." In a 1991 volume devoted to directions for staff

development in the 1990's, Griffin (1991) wrote that what is needed is interactive staff development, i.e., staff development based on research on the relationships between teacher culture and school improvement rather than on staff development itself. Staff development, from this perspective, is essentially redefined as a *school* improvement (not a *teacher* improvement) strategy and its nature and content are determined by research on how school improvement is supported rather than by applying "templates for effective teaching practices derived from research findings" (p. 246). By "staff," then, Griffin means a core of professionals who work together in a school site; "development" assumes people with diverse expertise moving forward together by "linking activities and events in coherent ways" and working toward a particular end.

Reflecting this changed approach, the language surrounding discussions of staff development has thus undergone considerable change from 1983 to 1991. Rather than *altering* peoples' practices, beliefs and understandings, or *training* teachers by transmitting to them predetermined skills and knowledge, the new rhetoric assumes the participants to be active constructors of their own professional practice, acquiring and generating knowledge as members of educational communities rather than primarily as individual actors. The notion of "altering the practices of persons" has itself been altered to emphasize "persons interacting with each other" to alter a school or school system. In a similar vein, Lambert (1989) signaled what she called the "end of an era" in staff development by describing as problematic the parallels between a training model in which the teacher as adult learner receives expert knowledge and the student learner receives direct instruction. Teachers, in her view, need to become more "proactive participants" who talk about their own thinking, initiate change in schools, and contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.

Not all of the literature reflects this perspective, however. Some assume that teachers must be offered practical ideas, that change is a linear process and by definition a gradual and difficult one, and that teachers need guidance and ongoing direction (Guskey, 1986). In a critique of this position, Tom (1986) argues that Guskey's model is "rooted in a non-reflective view of teacher, a view which over the long run actually creates the need for more and more externally imposed staff development" (p. 12). Tom cites Lawrence's (1981) comprehensive review of staff development which concludes that the most successful programs emphasize teacher responsibility. From this perspective, teachers can identify their needs and create appropriate programs, "even if their perceptions of their own needs do not always

correspond with areas in which they lack knowledge and skill" (Jones & Hayes, 1980, as quoted in Tom). Instead of beginning with specific practices, staff development programs can begin with teachers' thinking about their own work and can aim to reshape work environments to enable reflective and collaborative dialogue and to give teachers power to act on their conclusions.

In a comprehensive review of current models, Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1990) provide a conceptual framework for staff development by identifying alternatives for individual teachers. They differentiate among five models: the individually guided staff development model in which teachers plan and pursue activities to promote own learning; the observation/assessment model in which teachers get data and feedback on performance; the development/improvement process model in which teachers develop curriculum or other school improvement process to solve problems; the training model in which teachers acquire knowledge or skills through individual or group instruction; and the inquiry model in which teachers identify interests and collect and interpret data to make changes in practice. The authors point out that only the training model has been thoroughly studied and call for research that examines the others.

The Sparks and Loucks-Horsley framework does not emphasize the role teachers ought to play in selecting and designing staff development agendas, nor does it explore ways the work environment (i.e. school and district contexts and cultures) informs the nature, functions and outcomes of various staff development efforts. Furthermore, no matter which model is being used, so-called expert knowledge can be regarded as received wisdom, as is the case when the effective schools literature is used as a template for altering practices rather than as a source of information to be critiqued and adapted by knowledgeable practitioners (Zumwalt, 1982).

Staff development in adult literacy often emulates that in K-12 education, without sufficient examination or research on the special circumstances and conditions that make professional development in this field distinctive. One obvious obstacle is the lack of an extensive and rich research base on teaching in adult literacy. Although what has been written about K-12 teachers has some general applicability, the contexts for teaching in adult literacy and the routes into the field are vastly different. The same is true for research on learning in adult literacy.

This situation is compounded by the paucity of research on staff development itself.[1] Despite a range of writing in this area, there is a dearth of rich, empirical studies of staff development programs in

action (especially information about local and program site-based efforts). In addition, the literature often lacks coherent conceptual frameworks or approaches, such that the language of "training" and "knowledge transmission" sometimes co-exists with recommendations for alternative formats, self-directed learning, action research and the need for a "bottom-up" approach (Foster, 1988; Tibbetts et al., 1991). Evidence for the success of nontraditional models of learning for learners (i.e., more community-based, participatory approaches) coexists with traditional, knowledge-transmission models of learning for teachers and administrators.

Knowledge Generation and Use

There are many other serious problems in the field that contribute to its complexity and make generic solutions inapplicable. These include the persistence of child/school-based models despite a compelling literature on adults as learners; the need for curricula based on multiple literacies rather than on more singular, school-based notions; and the widespread and unexamined use of technical rather than deliberative notions of teaching (Zumwalt, 1982).

Rethinking staff development also entails re-examining practitioners' relationships to knowledge in the field of adult literacy. There are at least two interrelated issues here: the concept of a "knowledge base" that provides state-of-the-art direction for practice, and the roles practitioners play in the generation and use of new knowledge.

The concept of a knowledge base is frequently part of the discourse of teacher education. Statements intended to be useful for beginning teachers in K-12 education (see, for example, Smith, 1983; Reynolds, 1989) refer to the knowledge base as something mutable that takes a variety of forms, drawn from many disciplines and other sources. According to this view, the knowledge base, when mastered, provides teachers with a fund of principled knowledge—a set of constructs—on which to make reflective decisions or judgments. As Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1991) have argued, what proponents of a knowledge-centered teacher education curriculum seem to be saying is that the knowledge that makes teaching a profession comes from authorities outside of the profession itself.

Although there is clearly a rich body of information generated by university researchers that teachers can appraise critically and adapt for use in practice, this construction does not enfranchise teachers (or tutors and administrators) themselves as knowledge generators. An alternative view posits inquiry by teachers (and other practitioners)

themselves as a distinctive and important way of knowing about teaching and learning. The argument for this perspective may be summarized as follows:

> Teacher researchers are uniquely positioned to provide a truly emic perspective that makes visible the ways students and teachers together construct knowledge and curriculum. When teachers do research, they draw on interpretive frameworks built from their histories and intellectual interests, and, because the research process is embedded in practice, the relationship between knower and known is significantly altered. This obviates the necessity of "translating findings" in the conventional sense, and moves teacher research toward praxis, or critical reflection on practice (Lather, 1986). Further, because teacher researchers often inquire with their students, students themselves are also empowered as knowers (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, p. 3).

In this view of knowledge construction, research by practitioners (in this case adult literacy education teachers and administrators) currently marginalized in the field would thus play a more significant role in generating knowledge.

In the literature of adult literacy, the knowledge base part of this argument is receiving increasing attention, although the different positions are not yet clearly delineated. Foster (1988), for example, presents both a top-down and a bottom-up strategy. From a top down perspective she argues for the need to "infuse the state of the art into the minds of literacy practitioners," and "to quantify the state of the art" so it can be translated into practice (p. 14). Literacy practitioners, she suggests, need to be "provided with a framework for thinking about their work" (p. 14). The framework proposed by Foster would consist of a set of standards or specifications for practice applicable to all programs, regardless of their different orientations. In her view, standards of practice are to be extrapolated from what works in literacy programs in four categories: what and who should be taught, by what methods, and how learning should be assessed and evaluated.

On the other hand, Foster also presents a bottom up strategy by acknowledging that no one pedagogy is appropriate for all settings and purposes and that instruction must be contextually-based. She argues that "literacy practitioners should be major contributors to an

action-based research agenda that will result in the development of more informed training practices" (p. 20). She emphasizes reflection on their own practice by instructors and administrators and the viability of practice-based research (p. 27). The implications for staff training include privileging practice itself as well as federal, state and community-based research as sources of knowledge (as opposed, one presumes, to knowledge generated by universities).

Addressing the delivery and content of training for adult education teachers and volunteer instructors, Tibbetts et al. (1991), also raise questions about the knowledge base—such as the level of knowledge to be communicated to and learned by participants (p. 33). They argue that there are known bodies of subject matter or content knowledge (defined as reading, writing, math and second language acquisition) and pedagogical content knowledge that practitioners need to acquire. What some regard as conceptually conflicting approaches to pedagogy (Auerbach, 1989; Fingeret, 1984; Soifer et al., 1990) are listed in this survey without comment on these potential discrepancies. Several categories of knowledge suggest a perpetuation of the status quo—i.e., the placement of adults at instructional levels and the identification of learning disabilities—while others begin to touch on some of the messier issues of teaching and learning virtually undocumented in the field (e.g., awareness of cultural differences). On the whole, their data suggest that practitioners in the field are currently positioned as receivers rather than generators of new knowledge.

Both reports (Foster, 1988; Tibbetts et al., 1991) argue that inadequate teacher and tutor training is one of the main impediments to the improvement of services and that the lack of a body of adult education research on which to base training services is problematic. Differences among deficit, developmental, and contextual models of training are not articulated, however, so it is unclear where the practitioner stands in relation to knowledge. The many contradictions or conflicting conceptions in the field—between structured and participatory approaches, between professionalism and volunteerism, and between broad standards and context-specific needs and constraints—would argue for more field-based learning and inquiry.

The question of what practitioners need to know may be unanswerable unless practitioners' perceptions and experiences are given a more formal and legitimate role. Griffin (1991), for example, argues that more often than not, teachers are perceptive about their "shortcomings and strong points," a view he offers to counteract the long tradition of second-guessing teachers by "standing apart and

offering pronouncements about their strengths and weaknesses" (p. 247). Pointing out that teachers value highly their interactions with learners, he suggests they are less likely to work for improvements that do not appear to enhance student learning.

Professionalization and the Curriculum

There has been a long-standing debate in the literacy field about the qualifications needed for teaching and tutoring adult learners, i.e., issues around the knowledge, experience and formal training that teachers, tutors and administrators should have prior to or upon entrance to the field. On the one hand, the field has a long tradition of volunteerism, a tradition fed daily and directly by media messages about qualifications (typically defined as interest, time and a "degree in caring.") and inversely by historical difficulties associated with funding and educating a truly professional and primarily full-time workforce. Volunteer efforts are not only buttressed by extensive local, regional, and state-wide networks, but also by strong national organizations dedicated to the recruitment and training of volunteer instructors.

As with voluntary and paraprofessional support in public education, these adult literacy volunteers typically work with materials and strategies designed on the assumption that they are not experienced as teachers or even as participants in the field of education. Designers of training and tutoring packages proceed on the belief that the skills and knowledge needed to tutor must be transmitted through a process of "embedding intelligence" in the curriculum itself, yet in doing so they perpetuate the myth identified by Foster (1988) that "anyone can teach another to be literate" (p. 21). Furthermore, while some programs use tutors exclusively to provide instruction, others use tutors as adjuncts or apprentices in classes conducted by literacy professionals and thus use tutors as support persons rather than as primary service providers. Some programs are run entirely by volunteers. The roles and images of tutors in literacy programs thus run the gamut from volunteers who are presumed to need teacher-proof materials to volunteers who teach and administer programs quite independently.

In reference to professional qualifications for teachers, on the other hand, Foster (1988) points out that there is little agreement among the diverse set of literacy programs about what constitutes adequate training. For hiring teachers, many use criteria related to elementary or secondary teacher certification or possession of a college degree, although few certified teachers or college graduates

have previous training or coursework in adult education. Prior experience as an elementary or secondary trained teacher may provide a false kind of security for some literacy practitioners, however, who rely too heavily on techniques or strategies more appropriate to a different age level and context. Community-based programs are typically more flexible about qualifications and may favor members of the community, particularly those who have been participants in literacy programs, including those who may not have gone on to high school or college. Pre-requisites for selection as a program administrator are virtually non-existent (Foster, 1988).

There is concern about the relative paucity of university-based programs designed to educate literacy professionals for working with adults. And although there is some movement to encourage colleges and universities to develop more programs in adult literacy education, serious questions remain about the appropriate curriculum and qualifications for those who would design and teach in them. There is also a dearth of incentives for people to seek university training since the field does not guarantee high salaries or even the assurance of a job. Furthermore, current policies about entry qualifications for working in the field of adult literacy vary widely on the national level and from program to program.

To date, there has been little effort to investigate systematically relationships between types and goals of programs and staffing qualifications and needs. The complex decisions about who teaches, what's taught, and what role learners play in determining the curriculum suggest that the concept of professionalization itself be made problematic in ways particular to this field. Deciding on the appropriate job qualifications for teachers, for example, depends on the program's concepts of curriculum and instruction—the what and how of teaching in that particular context. For example, programs defining literacy as the acquisition of a set of technical skills may seek instructors qualified to follow published programs and materials. When literacy is defined as social practice and critical reflection, however, the curriculum is co-constructed by teachers and learners, with the content typically evolving from learners' individual and collective interests. Teachers and tutors, then, need to be oriented to participatory modes of teaching and learning. To establish entry qualifications for staff and professionals in the field, then, is to make assumptions about the knowledge practitioners need to teach or administer in particular curricula or programs and the role adult learners play in determining their own educational needs and interests.

Implications for Rethinking Staff/Professional Development

In such a diverse field, orthodoxy about approaches to staff/professional development hardly seems called for, yet it is unclear what range and variation of models are needed and for what purposes. On the one hand, the role of context—given the diversity of literacy programs and learners—seems central. Because the specifics of a setting cannot be known from the outside, on-site administrators, teachers, tutors, and other staff—not researchers and policymakers—become the primary experts on identifying needs. On the other hand, single-site based and in a certain sense idiosyncratic versions of staff development do not seem adequate for the field as a whole. With so little information about practice disseminated at the national level, literacy practitioners need opportunities to learn about the experiences of their colleagues, to get perspective on the characteristics of their own programs by comparing and contrasting features with others. Furthermore, there is growing evidence that we need to move ahead to enhance practice and research on practice at the same time.

There is little disagreement that practitioners want and need ongoing opportunities for learning. Improving practice and professionalizing the field by developing appropriate content, strategies, and infrastructure for staff development (Foster, 1988; Tibbetts et al., 1991) depend on understanding practitioners' preconceptions based on prior experiences with staff development and their perceptions of the adult literacy workplace as a context for collaborative learning. In an approach that synthesizes much of what we have discussed as problematic in adult literacy, Griffin proposes staff development in which participants' knowledge is valued and used and which considers seriously the interactions of teachers' work, workplace conditions, theories-in-use and engagement with new ideas. In this new conception, teachers' beliefs about their work with students—and administrators' beliefs about their work with program and staff—would be primary. Staff development would:

> capitalize on that knowledge, make it public and explicit, and use it to develop criteria for judging the worth of teaching, of curricula...it would be a primary source for deciding what is of worth and for determining "what works" in making what is worthy accessible to students (p. 249).

Staff development would thus involve a recursive process of articulating questions, interacting with the literature and with profes-

sional colleagues, and reassessing one's own knowledge. In adult literacy education, teachers, tutors and administrators could form researching communities to interrogate current practice and generate new knowledge from a field-based perspective. In many cases, these processes would also mean inviting co-investigative relationships with learners. The study reported here is based on these fundamental assumptions about relationships among literacy education, staff development, and the reform of practice and research.

The Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Project

Design of the Study

The Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Project (ALPIP) is designed to investigate practitioner research as a promising form of staff or professional development for adult literacy educators and as a means of generating knowledge about teaching and learning from a field-based perspective. It explores several critical areas, including (1) the prior experience, knowledge and interests of adult literacy teachers, tutors, and administrators; (2) the culture of the workplace and the nature of teaching, tutoring, and learning in diverse literacy programs; and (3) the processes and outcomes of sustained, research-based, and participatory in-service staff and professional development.

The core project activity is an ongoing practitioner research seminar that involves participants from a range of Philadelphia adult literacy agencies that vary considerably in size, services provided and affiliation. Programs represented provide ABE, GED, ESL, workforce-oriented and family literacy instruction in classes and/or one-to-one tutoring. While a few programs are independent, most are affiliated with university, church, social service, or community-based organizations. Seminar participants are primarily teachers and tutors who are conducting research on their own teaching practices with adult learners.[2] The group also includes program administrators who are investigating some instructionally-related aspect of their work, in some cases their own agency's staff development efforts. Participants thus use their different classes and programs as sites of inquiry into issues of instruction, curriculum, and assessment for varied groups of learners.

The seminar is planned collaboratively by participants and facilitators (university-based adult literacy educators and researchers) based on initial meetings and extensive interviews conducted primarily at practitioners' work sites. Bi-weekly seminar meetings and cross-visitations involve participants in critical reading, discussion and written response to the current research literature in adult literacy in relation to their own on-site observations, data collection and analyses. Documentation of the seminar—as a model for staff development based on practitioner research and as a source of knowledge about adult literacy learning—is

the collective responsibility of both university-based and field-based participants.

In the research described here, we focus on a particular type of inquiry-based staff development that we refer to as "inquiry-*centered*"—by which we mean staff development in which participants focus on (1) conducting "systematic, intentional inquiry into teaching, learning and administration by practitioners in their own program settings" (adapted from Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1991); (2) organizing inquiry as a social and collaborative process; (3) critically analyzing current theory and research from a field-based perspective; and (4) making problematic the social, political, and cultural arrangements that structure literacy learning and teaching in particular contexts. Inquiry-centered staff development starts from two key assumptions: that research by practitioners can contribute to both individual professional development and immediate program effectiveness and that these inquiries have the potential to enhance and alter, not just add to, the wider knowledge base of the field.

Data in ALPIP are generated and analyzed in two interrelated ways. First, data on teaching, learning, and administering in adult literacy programs are collected at program sites by the practitioner researchers participating in the seminar, then analyzed and interpreted in collaboration with other seminar participants, including the university-based facilitators. In addition, both practitioners and university-based researchers are investigating the processes and outcomes of the seminar itself as a community of practitioner researchers engaged in staff development and knowledge generation for the field. To date, methods of data collection have included fieldnotes and audiotapes of seminar meetings and planning sessions, documents and artifacts (e.g., application forms, demographic and program information), and in-depth interviews with seminar participants. Subsequent data collection will also involve participant texts (i.e., journals and other structured and informal writing), focus groups, on-site interviews, and program observations.

Purpose and Process of Exploratory Interviews

In spring-summer 1991, exploratory interviews were conducted with the initial group of Seminar participants, based on their ideas about what information would be most useful in the design of the seminar and in the research.[3] In all, 21 interviews were conducted and transcribed, and data on selected topics were reduced and organized so that the full group could explore their implications for working together in the project. During the summer break, interview transcripts were coded for information about participants' views of various aspects of adult literacy education.[4] A subset of these data are included in this report.

Toward Inquiry-Centered Staff Development

Findings from the initial phase of ALPIP have been organized in response to the following central areas: practitioner prior knowledge and experience, opportunities for and barriers to learning on the job, and practitioners' questions and interests.

Practitioners' Prior Knowledge and Experience

Data from the interviews provides information about practitioners' routes of entry to the field of adult literacy, prior non-academic experiences they regard as relevant to their work, as well as opportunities to engage in research and curriculum development that they either brought with them or experienced on the job.

Entry to the Field. As in the field generally, participants in the ALPIP seminar entered adult literacy through a number of routes. One-third explicitly used language indicating chance, saying such things as "I fell into it" or "It was an accident, really." Another third did not use this language, but chance or accident could be inferred from their stories as well. Some worked at agencies with other foci and got "drafted" when the agency wanted to start an adult literacy program, while others began by volunteering as tutors or getting their own GEDs and later applying or being recruited for jobs in the field. Of the 21 participants working with adult learners in the field, eight had no formal training in education when they started working in a literacy program. Eleven others had educational credentials when they began (most in elementary or secondary education), and two others became interested in the field and sought training before they started working in it. Prior teaching experiences represented in the group include a range of work with children and some adults—including those physically handicapped, deaf, gifted and labeled SED or LD—and a range of subjects (including writing, reading, history, African-American literature, speech and debate, chess and journalism). Most of the participants who taught in elementary or secondary schools did so for only a few years before moving on to something else, but one person taught for 27 years before moving into adult literacy.

Prior Non-Academic Experiences. Further inquiry into participants' knowledge and interests reveals a rich array of prior non-

academic experiences that they consider relevant to their work. These seemed to fall into several categories: (1) *experience with and exploration of one's own and others' cultures* through travel, childhood experiences, working with a variety of people in a variety of settings (e.g., Italy, Spanish Harlem, Washington, D.C.) and activities such as volunteering at the African-American history museum; (2) *work on issues related to anti-racism and to women*; (3) *experience working with groups*—either founding or facilitating them, studying and working on group (e.g., family or other) dynamics, being members of various groups, e.g., Bible study groups, community organizations, intentional group living communities, working with families; (4) *working in other, non-educational (but not completely unrelated fields), including publishing, social services and business;* and (5) *establishing and running organizations;* including businesses such as furniture moving and jewelry vending. In addition, participants actively pursue a wide range of outside interests in subjects such as the arts (design, sculpture, music crafts), African American literature and culture, sociology, social services (e.g. work with substance abusers and peace work), health education, and linguistics (e.g., American Sign Language [ASL], other languages). Exploring the interaction of these competencies and interests with styles of instruction in reading and writing and the development of literacy curriculum provides an alternative, and perhaps complementary approach, to understanding the qualifications, attitudes and skills needed for to work with adult learners.

Prior Experiences in Research and Curriculum Development. In addition to these "extra-curricular" interests, participants in the practitioner-research seminar brought to the field a range of prior experiences with research and curriculum development. Over half of the group has been involved in research prior to entering the field or during (but not as part of) their literacy jobs. These experiences include *academic research* on a wide range of topics including 19th century American writer Mary Wilkins Freeman, Black English, reader response theory, 20th century American history and literature, English romanticism, and medieval philosophy and literature. *Non-academic research experiences* included a study relating mothers' schooling and effects on children, classroom-based research on embedded predication in college level remedial writing, research on the women's educational equity act related to issues of sex equity in school districts, and research on child care issues as well as implementation of block grants, Black consumer boycotts, language development, holocaust survivors and their children, and acupuncture for drug rehabilitation. Previous experience with *curriculum development* in education focused on such topics as parents as tutors,

elementary language arts and science, American revolutionary history, integrated study of civics and English, social studies and science, sex education, minority literature, and special curricula for adapting teaching machines to be used independently by students with severe cerebral palsy.

Recent and current experiences with research and curriculum development. About half of the ALPIP group has been involved in at least one research project as part of their jobs. Some projects were funded by state or private foundations, while others were supported by the individual's agency or were undertaken out of personal interest. The research investigated issues of program effectiveness, including retention, relationships between attendance and reading levels, effectiveness of volunteer tutor training, program impacts on learners over time, and alternative forms of reading and writing assessment. Other research projects were aimed at better understanding of learners, through collection of language samples, past histories with school and work, and other study of special needs and problems that might interfere with the learners' educational progress. A few participants mentioned research intended to improve teaching practice, such as keeping a teaching log or other systematic documentation of practice. Because neither teachers nor funders typically view this latter kind of inquiry into practice as research, it is likely there are more cases than the available documentation would suggest.

Two-thirds of the ALPIP participants have been involved in developing curriculum materials at least once. Purposes, audiences, and definitions of curriculum development vary, so that some mentioned collecting materials primarily for themselves, for their students, or for other teachers as a form of curriculum development. Others have put together curricula on content areas or topics such as drivers' education, African-American women's poetry, and employment skills. Some of these curricula were aimed at specific populations of learners, e.g., family literacy, ESL and women in homeless shelters. Several participants have developed curriculum specifically aimed at teacher-to-teacher staff development or for training tutors. It appears that no one in the project has a mandated curriculum, and thus everyone is involved in some aspect of curriculum development on an ongoing basis.

In summary, it is evident that *practitioners bring extensive prior knowledge to the teaching of adults and to the administration of adult literacy programs, although many enter the field serendipitously with little or no formal training in adult literacy instruction.* Participants

in ALPIP brought prior non-academic experiences doing explorations of their own or other's cultures, working on issues related to anti-racism and gender issues, working with and organizing groups, working in non-educational but related fields, and establishing and running organizations. They also had a wide variety of prior experiences doing academic and non-academic research and in developing curricula.

Opportunities for Learning On the Job

Although a few of the ALPIP participants are relatively new to the field, the majority have expectations for staff development based on their prior experiences, expectations that have implications for change in the field. For the purposes of this preliminary analysis, we have divided the data into on-site and off-site staff development. The framework developed by Sparks and Loucks-Horsley provides one approach to analyzing the data and suggests some of the ways that staff development in adult literacy may be a different milieu.

(1) *Individually-Guided.* In the original framework this is a broad category ranging from very informal to formal, structured processes. The data show that none of the adult literacy programs represented here have individually-guided staff development as a formal, structured process, but several participants mentioned overseeing their own development—as learning through doing, as a process of self-education and reflection, as being self-taught, and as making staff development opportunities by working on projects with others. One person talked of "creating my own profession as I go along," and several mentioned collecting materials or keeping a journal as a means of self-directed staff development.

(2) *Observation-Assessment.* In the Sparks and Loucks-Horsley framework this category includes peer coaching, clinical supervision, and evaluation. Most adult literacy programs do not seem to have regular or formal supervision, much less structured observations by supervisors. Rather, some practitioners describe themselves as being "more or less on their own in teaching" while others regard supervision as unhelpful because of discrepancies in knowledge between them and supervisors or because of its infrequency. Although several of the programs represented here have recently tried to institute models of observation or cross-visitation, they have faced difficulties with funding, staffing, and scheduling these activities.

(3) *Development-Improvement.* This category includes processes of developing curriculum, designing programs, and participating in school improvement processes. For adult literacy practitioners, this category would also include research on one's program, since many

people in this group have done this, either through state-funded grants or in-house projects. About a third of the group have developed curriculum products/guides for use by other teachers. Only three people explicitly mentioned on-going, everyday curriculum development, but virtually everyone in the group works in programs where they do not use pre-packaged curriculum and where they make decisions about content, materials, and teaching strategies in an ongoing way. For some teachers or tutors programs this reflects a commitment to learner-centered or empowerment approaches; for others, locally-generated curricula reflects the perception that appropriate adult literacy curricula are not currently available.

(4) *Training.* The Sparks and Loucks-Horsley framework defines training as a workshop model where the presenter is an expert who establishes the content and flow of the activities. There is also usually a clear set of objectives or learner outcomes. Objectives are often determined by administrators or the trainer(s). According to the data from these exploratory interviews, many adult literacy programs have periodic workshops that fit this expert model, done either by staff or outsiders. Larger programs seem to have training for new and/or returning teachers at the beginning of the year. One participant made the following observation about typical workshop pedagogy:

> But the thing that I always find that the trainings are not presented in a way that we could get the most out of them that we could...[they're] presented in a way that's in contradiction to what I believe a teacher should be, where a presenter stands in the front and has an agenda and delivers that agenda and we just participate in it. I think that's a little backward.

Some workshops fit less easily into the training category, as Sparks and Loucks-Horsley have defined it. At some programs, for example, topics are generated by staff who run them more as inquiry than as transmission of knowledge from expert to novice. Others mentioned workshops by experts that do not follow this training model, e.g., ACBE trainers who worked with program staff on restructuring to include learners more in program processes. Some regard the "training" of new teachers more as socialization accomplished through "sitting and talking," although this approach may conflict with some new teachers' (and tutors') expectations that they be given more conventional training and a guidebook for practice.

(5) *Inquiry.* Although participants did not use the term "inquiry," clearly some programs are already involved in inquiry-based staff

development that involves identifying a problem, collecting data, and inventing some kind of learning activity for addressing that problem. Examples include groups within programs that share common readings as a way of problem-posing and discussing concerns, and groups that meet to explore ways of reshaping the curriculum or the program. Participants also refer to reflections on adult student-teacher interactions as powerful ways to learn about practice. As one participant (who unlike many others in the study had time to reflect) put it:

> To a certain extent, I just started winging it. I learned, I tried to pay very special attention to what I was doing. I made mistakes or sort of didn't have an interesting class; I tried to figure out how to make the next one more interesting. I had a lot of time to put into lesson planning and to figuring out what we were going to do, and that helped...Just internal brainstorming, I guess you'd call it. And I had time to do it which was very important. If I wouldn't have had time to reflect after class, I would have let things go. I think it's very important to reflect each day or else you miss things.

Another described a similar experience:

> We've developed, we learned a lot. We went through some section [when] people would say this...is boring, you know we can't stand it here. That's how we learned that's something we shouldn't do again.

What distinguishes these instances of reflection from research or inquiry may be a more systematic way of gathering and analyzing data from these kinds of interactions. Staff/teacher meetings are regarded as good opportunities for inquiry, i.e. for sharing knowledge, questions and concerns, and for planning curriculum. In some cases, however, people are not paid for this time, and sometimes these meetings fail to meet teachers' needs to inquire into their own practice:

> The first year I taught I went [to teachers' meetings] and I just found that there was this real tendency, if I raised a sort of problem-posing question in the meeting, for people to sort of pat me on the head and say do this, that will work. And I never felt their suggestions fit with my ideas of teaching or what my classroom was like or whatever. It was very much just, here's the solution.

As in many other organizations, literacy program staff tend to problem-solve by dealing with the most immediate and pressing

concerns rather than to raise problems or topics requiring more sustained discussion and systematic reflection and inquiry.

Participants also provided information about off-site learning experiences that may be included in a broad definition of staff development and that contribute to their current concepts of ways to learn on the job. These include university courses, conferences, informal teachers' groups, visits to (and sometimes workshops at) local materials/resource centers, program visitations (local, regional, national and international), and participation in university-program collaborative research. Participants have attended a wide variety of conferences, and although some people commented positively, concerns were raised about contradictions between presenters' methods and content (e.g., collaborative learning presented in an uncollaborative way; participatory conferences where information is presented using a "banking" model), about feelings of alienation at conferences (often based on the presentations of orthodoxies of the field without a context for examining or critiquing assumptions), and about degrees of appropriateness for adults in general or particular groups of adults.

In summary, the data on opportunities for learning on the job suggest that both teachers and administrators have had a wide range of prior experiences with staff development, both on and off site. *Practitioners in adult literacy education have had virtually no opportunities, however, to improve their practice through participating in ongoing, collaborative learning within or across programs.*

Barriers to Learning on the Job

Adult literacy programs as workplaces exhibit a range of problems that affect opportunities for learning on the job. Many of these function directly or indirectly as obstacles to on-site staff development and limit access to participation in staff or professional development opportunities off-site. The data suggest three major categories: space and physical conditions for teaching, tutoring and administering; professional lifestyles of practitioners; and structural or programmatic barriers.

More than half of the participants were concerned about poor physical conditions on the job. These included inadequate space and overcrowding, odors and filth, and even vermin. Some expressed concern about the disrespect for learners such conditions may convey. Both programs and teachers seem to have limited control over their space. Although five of the thirteen programs represented

have their own space where most classes take place, many other space-related problems contribute to low morale and unpredictability. Programs strapped for money must accept inadequate free or low-rent space. Several people mentioned being locked out of their rooms, and one person arrived at class to find all the furniture removed. Others cite the lack of meeting or lounge space for teachers and tutors. Even agencies with more space are not able to provide offices or adequate work space for teachers. Photocopying is a hassle for many teachers forced to deal with out-of-date machines that frequently (but unpredictably) break or to borrow xeroxing facilities from neighborhood organizations such as churches, requiring scheduling according to the limited hours of church personnel. Space and physical conditions such as these contribute to an atmosphere of instability and to practitioners' perspectives that they work in a marginal field and that they are marginal within their agencies.

In describing their professional lives, participants talk consistently about feeling overworked and therefore not having the time to devote to becoming better teachers. Of the 21 participants working in the field, 20% are part-time and the remaining 80% full-time. Those who teach part-time may have several other jobs. Of those who teach full-time, two have program positions only partly in literacy and only five work full time at either teaching or administering at the same organization. The remaining eight have many other responsibilities within their agencies, including teaching program development, and administration. Three of those working full-time do so by putting together a variety of positions at various programs. Those who are administrators also feel stretched in too many directions. Low salaries encourage practitioners to take on additional jobs, which in turn affect the energy available to develop their competencies. To some, low salaries also signal a lack of importance attached to the field. Staff turnover is high. Because literacy classes are conducted in so many different settings and at different times, and because small programs and decentralized class-sites separate teachers and tutors from each other, most feel extremely isolated, lacking the contact that could, at least in theory, yield supportive and helpful relations with co-workers.

Isolation also functions as a structural barrier to learning on the job. Although many literacy teachers have considerable autonomy, they regard this as a mixed blessing—while affording them a high level of freedom, they feel it also causes them to waste time reinventing the wheel, creating curriculum without benefit of dialogue with colleagues, and assessing the usefulness of materials without knowing how others have used them. Participants illustrated these feelings by identifying the interview as a unique opportunity for interaction and reflection. Below are excerpted reactions to several

interviews that reflect some of what is missing in the field and in peoples' professional lives:

- I guess I felt like I got a chance to air some grievances that I feel like I can't share with anyone very often and that was a good opportunity to do that. I feel so alone. I have to keep a professional [inaud] with my students and I really don't have a chance to share with other professionals.

- I realized that as I was talking my frustrations were coming out more than I had expected...there's really no one to talk to. It's one of those situations where you try to do the best you can under the circumstances you work in and you keep going, but if somebody would ask you, you'd have a lot to say and this was an opportunity, a good way to get out that information in a safe situation.

- We're always doing and we never have a chance to sit back and think.

The lack of community among practitioners seems to reflect a workplace culture often characterized by exhaustion, multiple demands, and limited resources.

Despite these conditions, a few of the participants spoke very positively of supportive relations with other staff, indicating that many of their colleagues try to be both approachable and helpful. The dominant theme, however, was a general concern with obstacles to collegiality within some programs and/or with obstacles to productive coalitions with other area services providers. Participants attribute tensions within and across programs to competing beliefs about literacy, teaching and learning, cultural and educational differences, and competition across programs for money, students, tutors and recognition. Agencies feel a need to expend more effort expanding services as a means to get additional funding rather than to do in-depth program evaluations or put in place processes to improve program quality. There was general agreement that none of these problems would represent an intractable barrier if systems were established for practitioners to confront these differences and challenges and learn from them.

In summary, practitioners' opportunities to learn on the job are constrained by *demoralizing problems with space and other physical*

conditions of their workplaces as well as pressures of time, job fragmentation, and other factors that contribute to an atmosphere of instability. In many programs, teachers, tutors, and administrators feel profoundly isolated in their workplaces and lack a community to support their professional development , both within and across programs.

Practitioners' Questions and Interests.

The exploratory interviews did not attempt to assess what this particular group of practitioners already knows about current research in areas typically associated with adult literacy education, e.g., reading, writing, mathematics, language learning, etc, nor did the interviews examine in any detail what these practitioners regard as primary sources of knowledge for their current practice, their view of research, or their stance on knowledge generation by practitioners. The interviews do provide, however, a preliminary picture of what these practitioners regard as important questions about teaching and learning and where they feel a need for knowledge—conceptual frameworks, information and strategies—to improve practice. Data were gathered on individuals' questions and on their views of the value of collegial learning—in both instances in the context of what they hope the seminar will enable them to learn.

Practitioners' questions represented a range of concerns more complex than those typically dealt with in staff development. The largest number, perhaps unsurprisingly, were questions about *how to teach*—i.e., how to work with adult learners in reading and writing, how to work with heterogeneous groups, how to assess learning. A second category of questions was closely related to the first but involved *self-evaluation of a current practice or role.* Whereas the first included more general questions about improving teaching and learning, those in the second category made processes of reflection and critique on existing practice explicit. Included in this category were questions about the gap between what a teacher wants to happen and what actually does, the role of white teachers in the African-American community, or what constitutes adequate practice and who establishes standards. A third group of questions focused not on teaching or administering from an individual perspective but rather on *program concerns and program administration.* These questions were addressed to opportunities for comparing program models and philosophies, systems for evaluating instructors and instruction, program evaluation strategies, and different approaches to program-based staff development. The fourth and fifth were closely related types. In the fourth category questions were framed

as investigations of *concepts, ideas, or issues,* such as current research in writing or learning disabilities, debates around phonics instruction in reading, the various meanings of learner-centeredness, and the sometimes conflicting or contradictory priorities of various funding streams. A fifth type were framed as broad questions of fundamental assumptions about *goals, policies, and politics* that underlie teaching and learning in the field. These included a range of questions about interprogram politics, race, class and gender issues, purposes and conflicting beliefs about literacy teaching and learning, and relationships between classwork and the community.

This set of questions provides a sample of what practitioners say they want and need to know. Rather than posing narrow technical questions, practitioners appear to be asking for opportunities for deliberating about practice, for questioning underlying assumptions and beliefs, and for examining processes as well as products. They also express many ideas about themselves as learners, describing the circumstances that might best facilitate their own professional growth. Time and again they reiterated a need for a way to get support, to share ideas and doubts, to learn what others are doing. These needs were expressed in a variety of ways:

- One of my big interests is in what people do all day every day, and...what are their lessons actually made up of, and how is their schedule made up...so I'm hoping that...people are actually going to talk about that more...like actually the nitty-gritty of having a group of students, and how do you take two and a half hours of your day and actually use the time...I'm not looking for a place to say the system is terrible and there's no money and we're overloaded with our jobs and stuff like that...

- One goal is to stay connected and to be more connected with other literacy practitioners in the city. I really want to know what's going on in the city and know other people and who they are and to feel like I'm really a part of efforts in the city. I'm also hoping to have a chance to address particular questions in my particular context with the help of some other people who share them. And I'm hoping that I can be useful and that I have something to add.

- [I want] to have a place to...challenge some ideas about teaching and to get some new ideas about

teaching and some time to really piece some of that together...I really like the idea of working with a number of different adult educators and being able to observe different classes, being in a place that would be intensive working over a period of time...a way to have a place to continue thinking about teaching and to do that during the year...every two weeks...to really address that issue.

- I'm interested in my own development as a professional. I want to be able to read about some of the different subjects and improve my knowledge of the field and be able to bring that back here, share that with teachers, other staff members.

- I was really interested in being part of this project because I think that I'm hoping it's going to pull a lot of things together for me, just by getting information, seeing what's going on in other programs and for no other reason than to feel better about what I'm doing because I'll be getting feedback. I feel that what I'm doing is a good job but I don't have anybody really to tell me that...You know, when you work sort of in a vacuum and you don't get a lot of interaction with other professionals, you don't know....It's that professional spark. You only need one idea to bounce off another idea and then you can create your own idea. And you feel like you're being a professional.

Other data suggest that teachers, tutors, and administrators bring to this experience quite diverse views of literacy, teaching, learning, research, and knowledge generation in the field. An ongoing seminar provides the context for identifying and exploring some of these differences and for working collaboratively to develop agendas and structures for learning from and with each other.

In summary, practitioners *come to staff development with a range of complex questions that reflect the local culture of their classrooms and programs as well as their commitment to larger issues in the field. Rather than simply posing narrow technical problems, practitioners are seeking opportunities to examine critically their own practices in communities of colleagues within and across programs.* These communities can provide a context for deliberating about practice, for questioning underlying assumptions and beliefs, for sharing ideas and problems, and for the processes and impacts of their professional work.

Inquiry-Based Staff Development in Adult Literacy: Implications and Directions Forward

Rethinking staff development as inquiry-based does not imply a commitment to identifying the one best way, nor does it obviate the need in specific situations for methods that may be oriented more to training or to knowledge transmission. Within the range of approaches to staff development that we may identify as inquiry-based, furthermore, there will undoubtedly be considerable variation. Practitioners currently in ALPIP, for example, represent diverse efforts to meet the needs of adult learners in programs of different scale and in different communities—programs focused on ESL, workplace, family, GED, and basic skills, as well as programs designed expressly for women, deaf adults, homeless individuals, or people coping with substance abuse problems. Each of these literacy programs has distinctive features (Foster, 1988) that invite somewhat distinctive approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment, and thus may require some site-specific structures for staff or professional development. What different approaches to inquiry-based staff development have in common, however, is that they build on what people in the local setting want to know and take into account the material conditions of their practice.

The data presented here suggest some implications and directions forward for designing and researching staff development efforts that center on practitioner inquiry.

Using Prior Knowledge and Experience

Findings from the initial phase of ALPIP seem to indicate a need for staff development that helps practitioners develop frameworks and tools for using and building on what they already know. That a considerable number of literacy practitioners currently enter the field with little or no formal training may not be as significant a problem as some suggest, certainly not a problem amenable to "fixing" in the near future by implementing conventional strategies, i.e., through graduate programs, credentialing or certification, and/or by standard-

ization and packaging of the curriculum. There is always a cost/benefit issue related to credentialing in a field with such low salaries, as well as liabilities associated with restricting entry to a field where people can become qualified in such diverse ways.

That people get into the field by different routes could instead be regarded as an asset, on the premise that this diversity mirrors the diversity of adults as learners and the diversity of contexts in which they seek to learn. Just as effective programs attempt to create meaningful environments for learning by building on the cultural, linguistic, and intellectual resources of learners, we need to utilize more fully and appropriately the range of abilities, skills, interests, and prior knowledge diverse groups of literacy practitioners currently bring to their work. An important byproduct of this direction is to enrich the curriculum of adult literacy programs, too often so heavily focused on skills that they lack coherent, meaningful content.

This argument suggests that we make problematic some current assumptions about professionalizing the adult literacy workplace. It does not preclude, however, the development of excellent programs to prepare practitioners, nor does it assume that practitioners themselves are typically satisfied with what they do and know. Instead, information about degrees and certifications needs to be supplemented by richer data about entry qualifications related to prior knowledge, interests, and experience, and from these data new ways identified and sanctioned for practitioners to use their skills and abilities in the practice of teaching, tutoring, and administering. In other words, the task, in part, becomes to try to understand how practitioners as literacy professionals already use what they know, and how particular patterns or complexes of qualifications, prior knowledge, and interests respond to particular needs in the field. Teachers', tutors', and administrators' world knowledge, for example, can be considered part of an expanded knowledge base for the field that, in turn, enhances the content of the curriculum.

Starting from Practitioner Questions

The complex nature of practitioners' interests and their rootedness in daily practice, suggests that effective staff development can begin with the questions of practitioners who identify their needs given their local contexts, their prior experiences, and their goals for teaching and learning. In research on practice such as that described here, questions emerge from day-to-day practice and data are gathered in an ongoing way. Their work embedded in the culture of their programs, teachers and administrators conduct systematic,

intentional inquiries into problems of practice in their own settings, using others in the cross-program researching community as resources for the analysis and interpretation of their data.

In staff development structured in this way, specific classrooms and programs serve as "critical sites of inquiry" to advance practitioners' own learning and to enable them to articulate and examine assumptions and concerns. In the context of these local studies in which practitioners investigate their own and each other's practice, the opportunity to read the current literature—both field and university generated—becomes both more meaningful and more critical.

Building Community

Although some have questioned whether adult literacy educators are interested in staff development (Tibbetts et al., 1991), the data show that practitioners' reluctance may be more related to the culture of the adult literacy workplace and to negative or limited prior experiences with staff development than to a rejection per se of opportunities to learn.

What may be most needed are ways to reshape the work environment to provide support for on- and off-site learning by building community, i.e., through ongoing networking and collaboration. More networks are needed for practitioners to meet regularly as collectives or communities to understand their own situations and to provide a broader context for the generation and dissemination of new knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992). Support for on-site staff development should be supplemented with stronger cross-program and agency networks that invite practitioners to come together in both job-alike and diverse groups over time. The cross-program comparisons possible through collaborative networks may be critical for analysis and interpretation of practitioners' individual experiences, and may contribute significantly to the building of a professional culture in the field of adult literacy education.

Because of its close links to daily practice and its collaborative structures, inquiry-based staff development has considerable potential to inform and enhance overall curriculum and program development as well. As agencies and programs become centers of inquiry (Myers, 1985; Schaefer, 1967), for example, they can also become settings for participatory program evaluation (Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Lytle & Wolfe, 1989). Rethinking staff development as a program improvement process rather than primarily as a means of individual professional growth means enhancing the capacity of the system as a whole to respond to adult learner needs.

Generating New Knowledge for the Field

The current literature and the data reported here also suggest the need for rethinking staff development by stimulating a deeper and more widespread dialogue between and among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers in the field about the construction and use of a knowledge base for the field of adult literacy. Many theorists in education have begun to question traditional relationships between research and practice, researchers and practitioners, researchers and the researched (Anderson, 1989; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Fine, 1991; Lather, 1991; Mischler, 1986; Taylor, 1991). Much of this work points to the blurring of distinctions between research and action and to the empowering potential of research designed and implemented as co-investigation.

Based on a contextual or socially constructed view of knowledge, more systematic data needs to be collected about what different practitioner constituencies feel they know and need to know. Rather than "infuse" practitioners with current theory and research, contexts need to be created for practitioners to read critically the research of university and center-based researchers as well as the emerging body of literature documenting research conducted by field-based practitioners (e.g., Auerbach & McGrail, 1990; Belzer, in press; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, in press; Isserlis, 1991; Martin, in press; Nash et al., 1989; Wolfe, 1991). These efforts contribute to problematizing the notion of a knowledge base, and bring practitioners centrally into the conversation about what counts as knowledge for the field.

Since practitioners express a strong commitment to learning from practice itself, this can be effectively coupled with the field's need to know more about the literacy needs and practices of adult learners through the support of practitioner documentation and dissemination of knowledge about teaching and learning. Furthermore, researching the practices of inquiry-based models (Auerbach, 1990; Fingeret, 1991; Wolfe, 1991) can help us understand what happens when an inquiry orientation is adapted and made available at different program sites. Research on these communities could thus investigate a range of questions about relationships among teaching, learning, research, and knowledge—including questions about the interpretive frameworks groups of practitioners use to document their own practices, about how practitioners read and critique research, about relationships between inquiring teachers and administrators and inquiring learners, and about critical similarities and differences across learners, programs, and community contexts as perceived through the eyes of teachers, tutors, learners, and administrators.

Researching the Practice of Inquiry-Based Staff Development

In this report, we are making the argument that rethinking staff development requires "building theory through rich descriptions and analyses of present practices" (Howey & Vaughan, 1983). This strategy has the potential to further our understanding of critical relationships between staff development processes and impacts as well as between program-based inquiry and program improvement. In addition to its function as a "way of knowing" for teachers, tutors and administrators in their local communities, practitioner research, moreover, has the potential to contribute significantly to public knowledge (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992), i.e., to become a way of knowing for the wider community of adult literacy practitioners as well as university-based researchers and administrators of large scale literacy efforts.

In adult literacy education, there have been to date almost no forums for conducting, presenting, and publishing such research. In addition, support for the design, implementation, and documentation of diverse approaches to inquiry-based staff development has the potential to reinvent relationships between research and practice and engage the disparate constituencies of practitioners, researchers, and policymakers in a common dialogue.

Endnotes

[1] A search of the literature on staff development related to the field of adult literacy yields a variety of documents, including personal accounts of practitioners' experiences (e.g., Dick, 1989); descriptions of training programs or courses (ACBE, 1989; Henry, 1990); surveys of practitioners' perceived interests and needs (ALRI, 1987; Metis & LAC, 1986; general/conceptual discussions of issues in professionalization including staff development and training (Balmuth, 1985; Boshier, 1985; Foster, 1988; Imel, 1988, 1989; Jorgenson, 1988; Merriam, 1985); reports of programs and services including information about staff training (Kutner, Furey, Webb & Gadsden, 1990); professional organizations' initiatives and conference reports (Aker, 1985; Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, Penn State Literacy and Technology, 1988); reports of state-sponsored training (Tibbetts, Kutner, Hemphill & Jones, 1991) and training manuals (Davenport, 1987). Although adult education journals (such as *Convergence*; *Adult Education Quarterly*, *Lifelong Learning*, and *Adult Education*) occasionally publish articles related to staff and professional development, these publications tend to be referenced to adult education more generally rather than to adult literacy or adult basic education. For additional sources see Tibbetts et al, 1991.

[2] The initial group ranged in age from 25-65 and consists of 19 women and 3 men, 18 Caucasian and 4 African Americans. The teachers, tutors and administrators participating have worked in adult literacy education from 1-14 years in programs ranging in size from 36 to 2,000 adult learners per year.

[3] An interview protocol was planned at the first seminar meeting in the spring. At that time, participants developed lists of topics in three categories: (a) what they wanted to know about each other; (b) what they felt seminar facilitators/organizers needed to know in order to plan the seminar; and (c) what they believed the field (service providers, researchers, policymakers and funders) needs to know about adult literacy educators. Following this activity, the facilitators organized and condensed the topics and used them to design the interview. The two graduate assistant facilitators interviewed the participants in a variety of contexts, including program sites, the university, and their own homes. At a second planning meeting, participants critiqued the interview content and process, orally and in writing, and came to some consensus about general guidelines for how the seminar should function in the 1991-1992 year. See NCAL Project 1.7a, Final Report Year 1.

[4] liminary analysis of these exploratory interviews has provided baseline data about how these adult literacy educators entered the field, the contexts in which they work, their concepts and practices related to literacy teaching and learning, their prior experiences with professional and staff development, their knowledge of and attitudes toward current issues of professionalization in the field , and their interests and needs in participating in a cross-program, field-university Seminar. See NCAL Project 1.7a End-of-Year Report, November 1991.

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